

Reisegaynor – Once always a teenager

Cliff Watson, January 2020

Disjunctive reflections of a Zombie-Paladin, remembered and recounted on the trail and round the campfire.

Crawbottom hamlet is near the river bend, 8 days ride from anything. If you have a horse. Fishing for crawfish or mudskippers, that's all we did in the village. My clothes were made from a little wool, and a lot of burlap, and I wove my own shoes out of reeds. It was a good day if there was more than one meal, an even better one if the protein was fish instead of beetles.

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I felt the hoofbeats before I heard them. I saw the King's soldiers ride in. Of course, they demanded food and drink, what could we do but obey? I wondered at the square wagon a team pulled, it's load under a dark tarp. After dark, I sneaked through their camp and peeked inside. Never had I seen such a sight! A soldier, looking dead to us all, in a cage, eyes open and still, blood unwashed from his hands and lips. As I stood there, quicker than a mudskipper he reached out, grabbed me through the bars, raked my arm with his nails, lifted me up and bit me on the side of the head! I screamed, poked him in the eye. I must have startled him, for he let me go. I fell, rolled under the wagon, and staggered off into the night.

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That was what drowning felt like. I remembered tripping on the riverbank, falling face first into the shallow water of the eddy. The shock of the attack, the fear, the cold water: I froze. All the air left my body, my heart beat faster and faster, my eyes saw only darkness. I felt my heart stop. Then I was dead, I know I was. Then I was somewhere else.

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I saw myself lying on a gray plain. Above me a platinum dragon (a dragon!), bigger than a village, battled an army of zombies. I knew they were coming for me. I never thought I'd be thankful to see a dragon! He flicked his tail and a silver spark flew from the tip and pierced my heart, like being stabbed with a blacksmith's poker, burning flesh, starlight bursting, searing pain. I gasped and floated up. A silver sword floated with me, I swear it!

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When I awoke, I was floating in the shallows. I stood up and saw a great silver sword sticking out of the mud. I was amazed that I could lift it – I'd never been so strong! Then the sword vanished. I still ache for it. I was starving and walked towards home. A guard lay resting against a wagon. My belly rumbled again, and I drooled like a dog; he looked so delicious. Ah, the pain! A silver flash crossed my head from side to side and back to front. Apparently, he wasn't for me. I skirted the village and caravan, and reached the cemetery. I found Great Uncle Crainer's grave; he'd died two days earlier. I dug him up, ate his brain, and reburied him. I knew I couldn't stay in Crawbottom.

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After leaving town, I ate whatever I could find on the lonely road. Bandits, goblins, other ne'er-do-wells. Rats even. Everyone has a brain and a girl's gotta eat, no? Then the visions come when I sleep.

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Have you ever dreamt about being a squirrel? Let me tell you, those little fuckers are mean! They'll beat up their brother for a nut. For a nut?! And rabbits are always scared, darting into my burrow – I mean, their burrow – to get away from foxes. Rabbit brains taste quite a bit better than squirrel, but that's not saying much. Human is best. Actually, goblin is a little peppery, although their thoughts are gross. I haven't tried elf. Don't worry, Amryn, you're not on my list. Hey, come on, that was a joke!

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People get weirded out when I look at them. I don't really have to blink so I guess... that's weird? Yeah. I have to watch my temper too. I saw my reflection in a pond once when I was angry, my eyes were glowing red, and dark veins were popping out. Freaked me out, I see why folks would be afraid. I try to keep myself fed and calm, so I don't scare anyone. They don't deserve that, right? Life's hard enough already without monsters.

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It's not safe. I can't ever go home.

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Eventually I found my way to Grimwall. Paladin-Cleric Grintl taught me many things in my year there. I don't know how he found me and recognized the spark inside. He was kind, and harsh when he needed to be. He made me into a Paladin of the Holy Order of Ruhwahlaan Benevolent, praise Their name. I had to sneak out into the town to find food, of course, usually a cut-throat or slaver mistaking a teen girl for helpless prey at night. It wasn't always easy to get away from the Order in time. Once, Grintl found me in a bunkroom, half mad with hunger. I was barely in control. The sight surprised him, he backed away and fell out a window to his death. Some townsfolk saw him fall, saw me in the window, and of course assumed that I had murdered him. So, I fled.

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I haven't aged a fortnight since I caught the disease. I'm still 15 ½. But I'm not the same at all. Not at all, I tell you! I miss mom.

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I don't recommend brains. They don't taste like anything, really. Mushrooms and wild onions can help. Fenmore, can you give me some cooking tips? Kaspar, can we look for sage?

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Why brains, and why am I here? I believe the disease is a challenge, maybe a contest, between Ruhwahlaan, god of Light and Life, and Saqhoved, god of Life and the Grave, a narrow path to walk between life and death. My heart beats, my lungs fill, my eyes blink, but barely. Not dead, not undead,

not quite alive. Maybe that's why I'm ever a child, to keep dark thoughts and rage at bay. I am a pawn, as we all are. But I don't really know.

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I kind of miss catching crawfish and basket-weaving. Mending leathers, not so much. Also, bartering the day's catch at the manor wasn't so fun either, those people think they're so high above us. I'd eat them, but the silver flash would probably kill me. I'm kidding. About the eating part. Really.

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I haven't really had too many friends since fleeing the Order. Trying to keep my head above water, making an unliving. You haven't heard anything about a platinum dragon, have you?

Note: a character backstory inspired by *iZombie*, by Chris Roberson and Michael Allred.